Practice theory workshop
Wednesday 9 June 2010, 9:30am – 3:30pm

These notes were prepared by Yolande Strengers and edited by Cecily Maller.

Participants:
Yolande Strengers, Geoffrey Binder, Helaine Stanley, Ian Jones, Naomi Blackburn, Ralph Horne, Ruth Lane, Stephen Clune, Susie Moloney, Cecily Maller

Aim:
To develop empirical examples of practices that inform our understanding of how practices change, and what opportunities exist for altering their course and composition.

SESSION 1: Practice summaries: Each participant spoke for 5 mins on their practice followed by 5-10 minutes of discussion. See separate attachment for practice summaries and notes from the group discussion. Some common themes emerged including ideas of modernity, class/socio-economic status, identity, power/politics, new knowledge and old knowledge.

SESSION 2: Synergies between summaries: Participants broke into 4 groups to identify synergies and trends across all of the practices. Discussion centred around four themes:
1. Practice circulation and recruitment
2. Competition with other practices
3. Transferability to other contexts
4. Current change and evidence of direct manipulation

Practice circulation and recruitment (Ian & Cecily)
Ian & Cecily identified different forms of recruitment and circulation across the eight practices. They attempted to consider recruitment and circulation as separate processes, but in some cases it was difficult to distinguish between them. The different forms were: the media (images and meanings), niches/ sub-cultures, visibility (being able to see and hear the practice), peer-to-peer contact, class and socio-economic status, and health. In the discussion, two further routes of circulation were identified: things/ objects/ artefacts (i.e. a bike), and urban infrastructure (i.e. a bike lane). Health was later considered more a meaning of a practice rather than a form of recruitment or circulation. There was debate around whether you are recruited into a practice just by knowing it exists and being able to recognise it as a practice (i.e. before you’re even ‘doing’ it) or by a specific event/ thing/ conversation that leads to the actual enactment of the practice.
Competition with other practices (Susie & Naomi)
Susie and Naomi identified common factors across the practices which contribute to competition between different practices. Key factors included cost/affordability, identify, time, space, life stage, ‘modern’ life, and mainstream vs. niche. They suggested that mapping practices in this way (and their relation to each other) could inform policy making processes, where the practices inform the issues that inform the policy (rather than the issues informing the policies). This discussion point was picked up again later by the group. An example given was heat stress. By starting with the ‘issue’ or ‘problem’ of heat stress we come with policies prioritising air-conditioning. However, in making the starting point the practice of cooling within the changing climate, a range of factors, issues and problems are raised – like peak electricity demand, heat stress, changing building infrastructure, declining competence/skill in how to stay cool etc.
Transferability to other contexts (Yolande & Stephen)
Yolande & Stephen identified the transferable and ‘less’ transferable components (or those currently resisting transfer) for each of the practices before pulling out common themes across all of them. Major transferring components were meanings, skills and stuff relating to the modernity and globalisation, particularly the spread of global industries (like the airline and food industries) global standards and aspirations (e.g. for comfort) and global ‘stuff’ (bikes/ cars etc.). Less transferable or resistant to transfer were physical (spatial?) aspects of the practice like climate, and ‘hardwired’ or ‘cemented’ stuff like road and housing infrastructures. They noted an emerging tension between modernity (to be ‘modern’ in the developed world is potentially different to being ‘modern’ in the developing world).
Current change and evidence of direct manipulation (Ruth & Helaine)
Ruth & Helaine divided up changes into ‘mainstream’ and ‘niche’ – later discussed as being worded as ‘conformity’ and ‘distinction’. At the ‘mainstream’ level, they identified evolving standards (norms) and increasing uniformity and conformity occurring across some practices. At the niche (bottom-up) level they noted uptake of specific practices/activities (rather than new global meanings/skills/stuff). At the niche level they noted a trend towards diversification and fragmentation. Some of the practices sat somewhere in between these two levels of change. They identified the interests behind direct manipulation across the practices, those being: profit-based interests, impact minimisation, health/wellbeing and social status.
SESSION 3: What’s missing?
The group had a discussion around the following questions:
- What doesn’t practice theory pick up?
- What change is left unaccounted for?
- How do we fit this into a practice theory approach?
- What’s missing from practice theory?

The majority of the discussion centred on the lack of ability to account for and conceptualise power and politics within a practice theory approach. The group discussed the internalisation of power within practices (or within practice theory) and how to deal with ‘context’. Geoff put forward a Bourdieuan/Giddens conceptualisation of practice theory, whereby individuals, once captured by a practice, internalise and habitualise it – and engage in conscious reflection in order to change it. In this situation, changing circumstances/social situations/political ideologies and issues of equity are viewed as external to the practice. Yolande discussed the need to view these ‘contexts’ as part of the practice. However, it was acknowledged by the group that if this approach is taken, then there is a need to look to other theories (i.e. socio-technical transitions) as a way of conceptualising broader political and institutional processes of change. In researching practices, there was agreement that the context of the practice being researched should be made explicit and it is important to be aware of other, potentially contrasting, contexts in which practices occur (e.g. developing versus developed world).

Ralph raised the issue of time and space as a tension in practice theory and not something he thinks has been adequately addressed (particularly in the context of change). The group agreed and attempted to identify where time and space fits within practice theory (is it outside or inside a practice?) Does time have the same agency/effect as a component of a practice, and if not, how do we account for it in processes of change?

Geoff raised the issue of reflexivity in research, and the ‘scholastic bias’ of our practice summary interpretations. We discussed the need to interrogate the practices of academics (and acknowledge our own life values), as well as everyday practices. Cecily suggested looking to qualitative health research methods which have well-developed techniques for bringing reflexivity into the research process.

Geoff also expressed concern about blaming individuals for their practices and including our own judgements in our understandings of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practices. Cecily mentioned that this is because as researchers interested in sustainability we are aware of certain practices being more resource-intensive than others. Yolande suggested that practice theory could be used without assigning blame. For example, it is possible to change practices without dictating what is a good or bad way of doing something or defining the end point (as a specific behaviour or practice we are aspiring towards).

Ruth raised the issue of property and ownership: property is owned and invested in, e.g. materials, things, and infrastructure. Consideration should also be given to the political economy (of practices?). Economies appear to be missing from practice theory.
SESSION 4: Attempting change
We ran out of time! So in this session we picked one of the practices (cycling to work) and briefly thought about how we could instigate change using a practice theory approach (in groups of 3)

Group 1: Susie, Cecily & Ian
Group 1 started from the bottom up, by listing the elements of the practice of commuting to work on a bicycle, which were materials/technologies (bike, gear), skills and knowledge (in cycling), mental activities and motivational knowledge, infrastructure (bike paths, roads). Underneath this they thought perhaps that there was a ‘substrate’ of space/geography that would affect ease of which carriers could undertake the practice of cycling to work (e.g. uptake potentially effected by urban design, city scale and topography). From here they worked upwards to consider rules and regulations, meanings and images, competing practices (driving, public transport) and wider contextual issues such as climate change. They looked at specific components of the practice that could be manipulated such as changes to infrastructure (bike lanes), meanings and images (leadership – e.g. politicians riding to work), regulations (incentives) and specific programs to encourage uptake (flexi-bike). These strategies, although they thought they were potentially useful, the group considered them to be overpowered by politics (the car lobby), economics (equity, power) and the need for re-framing what’s normal.
Group 2: Ruth, Geoff and Yolande

Group 2 also started with the practice, and with the questions that would need to be asked and answered in order to facilitate change. In particular, what constitutes current practice? Who does it? How are they recruited? They answered these questions and then looked at ways to intervene. They came up with four suggestions:

1. Encourage mass defection from competing practices (i.e. driving to work) through policy incentives/disincentives/laws such as congestion charges, petrol taxes and car-free zones.
2. Encourage & provide space for diversity – widen bike lanes and open up the roads to ‘human power’ and let’s see what types of practices develop!
3. Infrastructure provision: lanes, racks, showers etc.
4. Ride to school programs: develops skills/competencies and encourages young recruits

Again, power and politics (and the rise of public liability) is the issue here. How do we actually get these things to happen? How does/can practice theory deal with these issues?
Group 3: Helaine, Stephen & Naomi
Group 3 worked on Helaine’s version of ‘the triangle’ (Shove) and focused on opportunities for change using each of the elements/ components of the practice (to encourage recruitment). Again, this group sought to define the problem first (how you define is how you design) before considering opportunities for change. Some ideas they had were to visualise new ways of using the bicycle (meanings), promote particular images (social, fun), take away roads from car users (and give to bikes), make riding to work a tax deduction (like driving a car), and provide company bikes (rather than cars). They also came up against issues of politics and power.
In closing we agreed that we needed to continue this discussion in our practice theory reading group (or subsequent workshops). Several avenues/questions for further reading/reflection were raised:

1. Are we trying to change practices that use energy and water consumption, or are we trying to change the practices of behaviour change practitioners and policy makers (or both)? When doing the cycling exercise, none of the ideas we had were particularly ‘radical’ or new, but they are nearly all inhibited by political and institutional processes and paradigms. Surely this is why so many people fall back to behaviour change – to go beyond it means we need to directly tackle these issues of power and agency.

2. How do we account for power and politics in practice theory? This was an over-riding tension throughout the day that deserves further reflection.

3. Where does time/space fit. Is it a ‘context’ in which practice sits, or is it an integral part of practice?